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The Role of Self-Care Practices in Mental Health and Well-being: A Comprehensive Review

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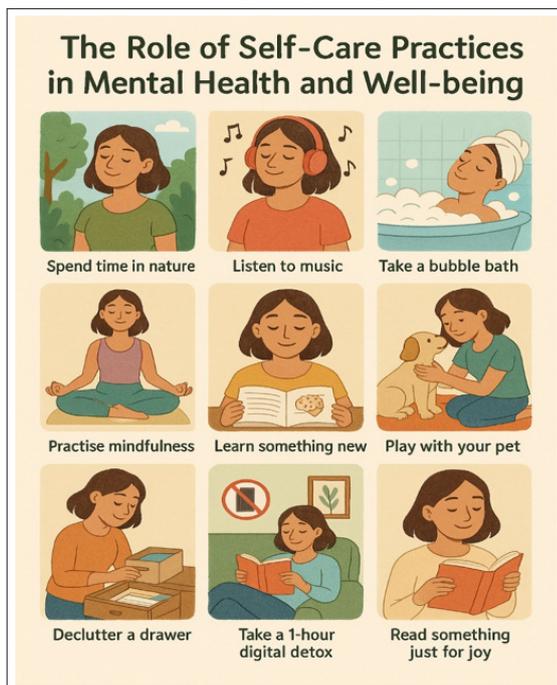
ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the significant role of self-care practices in promoting mental health and enhancing overall well-being. While many individuals turn to short-term fixes like caffeine and sleep to recover from stress, self-care goes beyond recovery and encompasses holistic practices that nurture the body and mind. By examining relevant scientific literature, this study explores how different self-care activities such as mindfulness, physical activity, nature exposure, and social connection influence mental health outcomes like anxiety, depression, and stress. The paper aims to clarify the distinction between recovery and self-care and emphasize the importance of making self-care an integral part of daily life.

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Introduction

In the modern era, mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and burnout are becoming increasingly prevalent due to the high demands of work, social life, and technology. While many individuals manage stress by relying on sleep, caffeine,

or other quick fixes, these are merely recovery mechanisms, not long-term solutions. True self-care involves more than just replenishing lost energy; it is a comprehensive approach to mental health maintenance. This paper explores the role of self-care practices in promoting long-term psychological resilience and improving overall well-being. By reviewing existing studies, we aim to highlight the benefits of various self-care activities and the difference between recovery and self-care, ultimately advocating for the integration of self-care into everyday life to prevent burnout and mental health crises.

The distinction between "getting through the week" and "nurturing the mind and body" is vital. While the former focuses on mere survival, the latter emphasizes emotional and psychological replenishment. As Kabat-Zinn (1990) suggested, mindfulness practices are a central component of self-care, contributing to better stress management. This paper integrates findings from a range of studies on the positive effects of self-care practices such as mindfulness, physical activity, nature exposure, and social support on mental health, focusing on their preventive role against anxiety, depression, and stress (Hofmann et al., 2010; Bratman et al., 2015).

When we focus solely on "getting through the week," we often sacrifice long-term well-being for short-term survival, using quick fixes like caffeine or sleep. However, this approach does not address the root causes of stress and emotional depletion. True self-care, on the other hand, takes into account the need for consistent and restorative practices that nurture both the mind and body. It is about creating a sustainable lifestyle that prioritizes mental health and well-being, rather than merely surviving the demands of daily life.

Mindfulness, for example, is not just about finding relief from stress, but developing an ongoing practice that allows individuals to remain present and manage difficult emotions effectively. Regular physical activity, nature exposure, and strong social connections further support emotional resilience, offering holistic approaches to stress management. These practices help build a buffer against the negative impacts of stress, which can lead to anxiety and depression if left unchecked. Therefore, integrating these self-care habits into our daily routine is essential for not just surviving, but thriving in a high-demand world.

Methodology

A systematic review of research literature was conducted using scientific databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Relevant studies published between 1984 and 2024 were selected based on keywords such as “self-care,” “mental health,” “mindfulness,” “nature therapy,” and “burnout prevention.” Only peer-reviewed articles, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews were included to ensure scientific rigor. The research focuses on studies that investigate the relationship between self-care and mental health, particularly its effects on symptoms of anxiety, depression, and burnout. This paper synthesizes findings from experimental, longitudinal, and observational studies to provide an evidence-based understanding of the impact of self-care on mental health.

Results

The literature review revealed several key self-care practices that are closely linked with improved mental health outcomes:

- **Mindfulness and Meditation:** Mindfulness practices, including meditation, have been found to significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. Research by Hofmann et al. (2010) indicated that mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) enhance emotional regulation and reduce stress levels by increasing self-awareness and promoting a non-judgmental attitude toward one’s thoughts. Kabat-Zinn (1990) argued that mindfulness allows individuals to develop a present-focused awareness that reduces rumination, a common factor contributing to anxiety and depression. This shift in focus from past worries or future anxieties helps individuals break the cycle of negative thinking that often exacerbates these conditions. Moreover, mindfulness practices have been shown to improve attention control, emotional stability, and overall mental well-being. When individuals practice mindfulness, they learn to observe their thoughts without becoming emotionally entangled in them, which can diminish the intensity of negative emotional experiences. As a result, regular mindfulness and meditation not only help in managing acute symptoms but also build long-term resilience against mental health challenges. This ongoing practice serves as a powerful tool for preventing relapse in individuals who have experienced anxiety or depression, fostering a more balanced and emotionally grounded approach to life.

- **Physical Activity:** Exercise, particularly aerobic activities, has long been associated with improved mood and reduced mental health symptoms. According to Sharma et al. (2006), regular physical activity stimulates the release of endorphins, which are natural mood enhancers, and lowers levels of cortisol, the hormone associated with stress. Numerous studies have confirmed that exercise has antidepressant and anxiolytic effects, providing a natural and cost-effective strategy for managing mental health (Sharma et al., 2006). Additionally, physical activity has been shown to promote neurogenesis in the brain, particularly in areas associated with mood regulation, such as the hippocampus. This

suggests that exercise not only alleviates symptoms of anxiety and depression but may also contribute to the long-term structural and functional health of the brain. Furthermore, engaging in physical activity helps to improve sleep quality, another essential component of mental health, as regular exercise has been linked to deeper, more restorative sleep cycles. The benefits of exercise extend beyond the release of endorphins and hormonal changes; it also provides individuals with a sense of accomplishment, increases self-esteem, and reduces feelings of helplessness, all of which are crucial for combating mental health challenges. Therefore, incorporating regular physical activity into one’s routine is an essential element of self-care that provides both immediate relief and long-term psychological benefits.

- **Nature Exposure:** Spending time in natural environments is another effective self-care practice. Research by Ulrich (1984) showed that simply viewing natural landscapes can enhance recovery after surgery, suggesting a profound connection between nature and mental health. Further studies have corroborated these findings, showing that exposure to nature reduces stress, improves mood, and enhances cognitive function (Berman et al., 2012). A meta-analysis by Bratman et al. (2015) concluded that walking in nature significantly decreases rumination and boosts well-being. Moreover, research indicates that time spent in nature can lower blood pressure, reduce cortisol levels, and improve immune function, all of which contribute to reducing the physiological markers of stress. These restorative effects are thought to be linked to the “biophilia hypothesis,” which posits that humans have an inherent connection to nature, and that this connection fosters emotional and psychological healing. Nature exposure also promotes mindfulness, as individuals are encouraged to be present and aware of their surroundings, further enhancing the mental health benefits. Engaging in outdoor activities, such as hiking, gardening, or simply walking in a park, has been found to significantly improve mood and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. Thus, regular interaction with natural environments offers a powerful, accessible, and cost-effective tool for improving mental health and fostering emotional well-being.

- **Social Connection:** Maintaining strong social ties is crucial for mental health. Cohen and Wills (1985) demonstrated that social support acts as a buffer against the negative effects of stress. Positive social relationships help mitigate feelings of loneliness and isolation, contributing to emotional resilience. Engaging in social activities, forming new connections, and receiving emotional support from friends and family are key components of effective self-care. Furthermore, social connections have been shown to improve overall life satisfaction, reduce the likelihood of mental health disorders, and promote a sense of belonging and security. Research suggests that social support can activate neural pathways involved in stress regulation, leading to reduced physiological stress responses and promoting emotional well-being (Uchino, 2006). Strong social ties are also linked to better coping strategies during difficult times, as they provide individuals with the emotional tools to navigate adversity. Additionally, participating in community or group activities can foster a sense of purpose, enhancing self-esteem and reducing feelings of hopelessness or helplessness, which are commonly associated with depression. Thus, prioritizing social connections is not just a form of self-care but a foundational pillar for maintaining mental health, as it provides the emotional resources necessary to face life’s challenges with resilience and optimism.

• **Sleep and Nutrition:** Good sleep hygiene and proper nutrition are foundational aspects of self-care. Sleep deprivation has been linked to an increased risk of mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety (Walker, 2017). Ensuring adequate and quality sleep is vital for cognitive function and emotional regulation. In addition, a balanced diet rich in nutrients plays a crucial role in mental health by regulating mood and supporting brain function (Jacka et al., 2010). The brain requires a variety of vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients to function optimally, and deficiencies in key nutrients, such as omega-3 fatty acids, B vitamins, and magnesium, have been linked to symptoms of depression and anxiety. Proper nutrition supports neurotransmitter function, which is vital for maintaining emotional stability and cognitive performance. Moreover, a healthy gut microbiome, which is influenced by diet, has been increasingly recognized as playing a significant role in mental health, with research suggesting that gut health is directly connected to mood and mental well-being (Cryan & Dinan, 2012). Therefore, by prioritizing both sleep hygiene and proper nutrition, individuals can significantly enhance their mental health and reduce the risk of developing mental health disorders. Together, these practices create a strong foundation for emotional regulation, cognitive function, and overall well-being.

Discussion

The results of this review emphasize that self-care is much more than a reactive strategy for managing stress and anxiety; it is a proactive approach to maintaining mental health and preventing burnout. As Walker (2017) highlights, sleep is an essential component of recovery, but it is not enough on its own. Self-care practices such as mindfulness, physical activity, nature exposure, and social engagement are fundamental to sustaining mental well-being over the long term. These practices help individuals build resilience, reduce the impact of stress, and prevent the onset of mental health issues.

The evidence supports the idea that self-care practices are not just tools for recovery but essential elements of a healthy lifestyle. As Kabat-Zinn (1990) pointed out, mindfulness offers a way for individuals to cultivate awareness and presence in their lives, which helps reduce the impact of daily stressors. Moreover, the benefits of physical activity and nature exposure align with previous studies showing that these practices foster emotional regulation and improve mood (Bratman et al., 2015; Berman et al., 2012). These practices enhance the brain's capacity to cope with stress, while also offering long-term benefits that contribute to better emotional and physical health.

However, one of the significant challenges lies in changing the perception of self-care from being a luxury to a necessity. There remains a widespread cultural bias that views self-care as indulgent or unnecessary, particularly in high-pressure environments such as the workplace or academic settings. This stigma around self-care often leads individuals to neglect their mental health, believing that they must push through stress and exhaustion in order to be productive. In order to address this, public health initiatives must advocate for integrating self-care into everyday routines, especially in high-stress environments. These initiatives should emphasize that taking time for self-care is not a sign of weakness, but rather an investment in long-term health and well-being.

Healthcare providers also have a crucial role in this shift, by emphasizing the importance of self-care as part of comprehensive mental health treatment plans. Incorporating self-care practices into therapeutic interventions can improve both immediate and long-term mental health outcomes. Self-care activities such as

mindfulness, exercise, and social support can act as complementary therapies, alongside more traditional treatment approaches. Moreover, empowering individuals with the knowledge and tools to practice self-care on their own can foster greater autonomy in managing their mental health.

Another important aspect of integrating self-care into daily life is education. There is a need for greater public awareness about the direct connection between self-care practices and improved mental health outcomes. By normalizing self-care and making it a societal priority, we can combat the rising mental health crisis and create environments where individuals feel empowered to prioritize their well-being. Ultimately, incorporating self-care into everyday life is essential not only for preventing mental health issues but also for fostering long-term emotional resilience and a higher quality of life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper highlights the critical importance of self-care in promoting mental health and well-being. True self-care involves not only recovery from stress but also proactive practices that enhance emotional resilience, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and prevent burnout. Incorporating self-care into daily life is essential for long-term mental health maintenance. Further research should continue to explore the effectiveness of different self-care practices across various populations, including at-risk groups such as students, healthcare workers, and individuals with chronic mental health conditions.

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